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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that a person's attraction to a stranger is influenced by experimental manipulations suggested by general behavior theory. To examine whether a neutral observer, listening to a conversation between two strangers, could be influenced by the manipulation of several learning variables, 80 female undergraduates listened to a female actor responding to questions from a male she had just met. Subjects were randomly assigned to 1 of 16 treatment cells in a 2X2X4 factorial design. Learning variables manipulated were the nature of the actor's response (positive or negative) to the questions, amount of time the actor took to answer, and the number of social reinforcers received by the questioner. Subjects listened to a tape recorded interaction and then attributed to the actor some degree of liking for the questioner. The results indicated that the actor responding positively was judged to like the questioner significantly more than the actor responding negatively. For subjects who heard only four question-response trials, the actor's response time did not influence the subject's attribution of liking. Subjects who heard 10 trials, however, attributed more liking to the actor if she responded quickly than if she responded slowly. The number of actor-response pairings also influenced the subjects' attributions of liking. Other results provided modest support for contrast effects following response latency shifts. Future research should examine the role of general behavior theory in explaining and predicting effects in the attribution of liking. (NRB)

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Contrast Effects in the Attribution of Liking

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Running Head: CONTRAST EFFECTS

Contrast Effects in the Attribution of Liking.

Using general behavior theory as a model, Byrne (1971) demonstrated that a person can function as a conditioned stimulus for affectively positive information. For example, if a stranger is associated with a social reinforcer, such as attitudinal agreement, the stranger will be liked by the person with whom he or she agrees. An extensive body of research exists demonstrating that a person's attraction to stranger is influenced by experimental manipulations suggested by general behavior theory. In the present research we investigated the possibility that a neutral observer, listening to a conversation between two strangers, would also be influenced by the manipulation of several learning variables.

The procedure used in this experiment is similar to procedures used in attribution research. That is, an actor performs some behavior, or set of behaviors, and an observer is asked to attribute to the actor causes or reasons for the action. In the present research a female actor responded to several questions posed by a male she had just met. The experimental subject observing this interaction was asked to attribute to the actor some degree of liking for the questioner. In traditional attraction research, it is the questioner, the person receiving information from the actor, that would be asked to indicate his or her degree of

attraction to the actor. Only on rare occasions is the traditional attraction research subject asked to estimate how much the actor might like or dislike him or her. In this study, it was a neutral observer, not one of the converstation participants, making attributions of liking.

Four learning variables were manipulated. The first variable involved the nature of the actor's response, either a social reinforcer or social punisher. The second variable involved the amount of time the actor took to answer a question posed by a person she had just met. From a conditioning perspective, this particular manipulation serves as a CS-UCS interstimulus interval analog. The third variable was the number of social reinforcers received by the questioner. Finally, the research examined the effects of interstimulus interval shifts, or contrast effects.

Several predictions regarding the observer's attribution of liking to the actor were tested. First, we predicted that the actor's positive response to the questioner would result in the observer attributing more liking to the actor. Second, we tested the hypothesis that a short response time, compared to a long response time, would result in the observer attributing more liking to the actor. Third, we evaluated the prediction that the amount of attraction attributed to the actor would be influenced by the total number of conversation trials heard by the subject. We also investigated interstimulus interval, or response time shifts.

Contrast effects were expected when, during the course of the conversation, the actor's response time shifted. More liking would be attributed to the actor if her response time shifted from short to long.

Method

Subjects

Eighty female subjects were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at California State University, San Bernardino. One subject was run per experimental session.

Design

The subjects were randomly assigned to one of 16 treatment cells in a 2 x 2 x 4 factorial design. Half of the subjects listened to a female actor respond positively to a male questioner, and half of the subjects listened to the actor respond negatively. Half of the subjects listened to a total of 4 question-response trials, and half of the subjects listened to a total of 10 trials. Four response latency conditions were also manipulated. In condition 1, subjects listened to the actor respond in 2 sec. during the entire conversation. In condition 2, subjects listened to the actor respond in 2 sec. during the first half of the conversation and then shift to 4 sec. for the second half. In condition 3, subjects listened to the actor respond in 4 sec. during the entire conversation. In condition 4, subjects listened to the actor respond in 4 sec. during the first half of the conversation and then shift to 2 sec. for the second half.

Procedure

Upon arriving at the lab, the subject was seated at a desk equipped with a set of headphones. A soundproof partition separated the subject and the experimenter.

The subject was told that she would be listening to a tape recorded conversation lasting approximately 2 minutes. The instructions indicated that the converstaion was recorded at a Comptuer Dating Service. According to the instructions, the male and female participating in the conversation had not met prior to their conversation being recorded.

Each subject heard a male questioner ask a female actor a series of either 4 questions or 10 questions after a very brief introduction. The questions posed by the male were selected from a list of topics 20 undergraduate females had indicated were most likely to elicit a compliment. A question and its corresponding answer constituted one trial. For example, on trial 3, the questioner asked "How about my clothes? Do you like the way I am dressed?" Depending upon group assignment, the subjects heard the actor respond positively: "Yes, you look alright" or Negatively: "Not particularly. You look alright."

The actor's response time manipulation involved splicing the recorded material together so that the time between the end of the question and the beginning of the actors response was either 2 sec. or 4 seconds. For half the subjects, a response time shift occurred (2 sec. to 4 sec. or 4 sec. to 2

sec.). At the end of the recording, the questioner asked the female if she would like to go out. The tape ended before the female replied.

After listening to the tape, the subjects were asked to respond on a 9 point Likert-type attitude scale. Each subject was asked to estimate the female actor's liking or disliking for the male questioner. The higher the score, the more the actor was judged to like the questioner. Subjects were then completely debriefed: the experiment's rationale was discussed, the reasons for the deception explained, and questions answered.

Results

In order to test the first a priori hypothesis, the attributions of liking made by subjects hearing the actor respond positively were compared to the attributions made by subjects hearing the actor responded negatively. As expected, the actor responding positively was judged to like the questioner significantly more than the actor responding negatively, $F(1,64) = 6.50$, $p = .01$. Although the actors direction of response (positive or negative) influenced the observers attributions, no additional significant effects were evidenced when the actor responded negatively. Thus, the remaining effects pertain to only those subjects hearing the actor respond positively to the questioner.

The second hypothesis received only partial support. That is, in the 4 trial condition, the actor's response time,

short vs. long, did not influence the subjects' attributions of liking. However, in the 10 trial condition, subjects attributed more liking to the actor if she responded "quickly" than if she responded more "slowly," $t(64) = 3.89$, $p < .005$.

The number of actor-response pairings also influenced the subjects' attributions of liking. In the short latency condition, the subject listening to 10 actor-response pairings attirbuted more liking to the actor than sujbects hearing only 4 pairings, $t(64) = 3.33$, $p < .005$. In the long latency condition, subjects hearing 10 trials attributed less liking to the actor than subjects hearing only 4 trials, $t(64) = 1.39$, $p < .10$.

Contrast effects were examined by comparing attributions made by subjects hearing response time shifts to attributions made by subjects hearing the actor respond consistently across the conversation trials. In the 4 trial condition, subjects hearing the actor shift response latency from 2 sec. to 4 sec. evidenced a tendency to attribute less liking to the actor than subjects hearing the actor respond to the questioner in a consistently "slow" fashion, $t(64) = -1.11$, $p < .15$. And, subjects attributed more liking to the actor when the actor shifted response latency from 4 sec. to 2 sec. than when the actor consistently responded "quickly" across the 4 trials, $t(64) = -2.22$, $p < .025$.

Although the attributions made by subjects in the 10

trial condition did not evidence traditional contrast effects, they did indicate a sensitivity to changes in the actor's response latency. For example, subjects hearing the actor shift response latency from 2 sec. to 4 sec. attributed less liking to the actor than when she consistently responded "quickly", $t(64) = 4.26$ $p < .003$. And, subjects hearing the actor shift response latency from 4 sec. to 2 sec. attributed more liking to the actor than when she consistently responded "slowly", $t(64) = 2.36$, $p < .025$.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that a neutral person's attributions of liking after listening to a conversation between a male and a female is influenced by several important learning variables. General behavior theory predicts that a stranger can become a conditioned stimulus for an affectively positive response. An individual receiving social reinforcement from a stranger reliably indicates attraction to the stranger. The present research indicates that a neutral observer is also influenced by the parameters of the interaction taking place between two strangers. As expected, where one of the strangers (the actor) is associated with social reinforcement, an observer will attribute more liking to the actor than if the actor is associated with social punishment.

General behavior theory predicts that the interval between two stimuli influences the strength of association

developed between them. In the present study, we expected that attributions of liking would be influenced by the time interval between the actor functioning as a conditioned stimulus analog and her response, functioning as a reinforcement analog. Shorter interstimulus intervals would result in the development of a stronger association between the actor and her response. Our results indicated support for this expectation. Despite hearing the actor respond positively in both groups, subjects hearing the actor respond "quickly" vs. "slowly" attributed more liking to the actor. This particular effect required 10 trials, that is, 10 actor-response pairings, to be manifest.

The total number of actor-response pairings, that is, the number of reinforced conversation trials, also influenced the subjects' attributions of liking. As expected, in the short latency condition, subjects listening to 10 actor-response pairing attirbuted more liking to the actor than subjects hearing only 4 pairings. And, in the long latency condition, subjects listening to 10 converstation trials attributed less liking to the actor than subjects listening to only 4 trials. Both of these results are in line from predictions made from general behavior theory and conditioning theories of interpersonal attraction.

The results provided modest support for contrast effects following response latency shifts. Prior research has typically shifted reward magnitudes rather than interstimulus

intervals. Mascaro and Graves (1973), for example, shifted the proportion of similar attitudes in examining contrast effects. Their results were similar to ours in that their female subjects showed a positive contrast effect, but were reluctant to indicate less attraction to the stranger when the proportion of similar attitudes shifted from high to low. It is important to remember that our contrast effects ere evidenced only in the 4 trial condition when the formations of attributions may be relatively fluid. In the 10 trial condition, attributions were influenced more by the overall strength of the association between the actor and her response. That is, if she onsistently responded "quickly", she was judged to like the questioner more than if she shifted her response latency from short to long. And, if she responded consistently "slowly", less liking was attributed to her than if her response time shifted from long to short. In conclusion, the results promise a wealth of research in examining the role of general behavior theory in explaining and predicting effects in the attributions of liking.

References

Byrne, D. (1971). The attraction paradigm. New York: Academic Press.

Mascaro, G., & Graves, W. (1973). Contrast effects of background factors on the similarity-attraction relationship. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 25, 346-350.

Table 1. Mean Attributions of Liking

	Number of Positive Response Trials	
Latency Shift	Four	Ten
Short - Short	$4.00_{b,d}$	$6.40_{a,b,e}$
Short - Long	3.80	4.40_{e}
Long - Long	4.60_{c}	$3.60_{a,c,f}$
Long - Short	5.60_{d}	5.60_{f}

Note. Larger numbers mean more liking attributed to actor. Means having a common subscript are significantly different.